

**Building participation and relevance in
arts and cultural education**

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Abstract

In 2004-5 UNESCO in collaboration with the Australia Council for the Arts (The Council) and the International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies (IFACCA) commissioned research to establish the impact (if any) of arts-rich programmes on the education of children and young people around the world. The findings indicated that the arts make a valuable contribution to the total education of children especially in relation to academic performance, well-being, attitudes to school and perceptions of learning but that the character of arts education varies considerably from country to country. Furthermore, while most countries acknowledge the value in arts and cultural education,

there is a difference between policy and practice. This paper explores issues of participation and relevance and argues that excellence in arts education means there is both accessibility and high quality for all.

Introduction

In 2004-5 *UNESCO* in collaboration with the *Australia Council for the Arts* (The Council) and the *International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies* (IFACCA) commissioned research to establish the impact (if any) of arts-rich programmes on the education of children and young people around the world.

The aim of this research was to determine a baseline in terms of the status of arts education around the world.

The findings indicated that the arts make a valuable contribution to the total education of children especially in relation to academic performance, well-being, attitudes to school and perceptions of learning but that the character of arts education varies considerably from country to country.

On the basis of the international study, a number of national studies have now been conducted. These studies raise questions about the quality of arts education received.

In particular, the focus of this presentation is on exploring the issues of high rates of participation and the degree to which

the programmes offered have a high degree of relevance to young people.

Making arts meaningful?

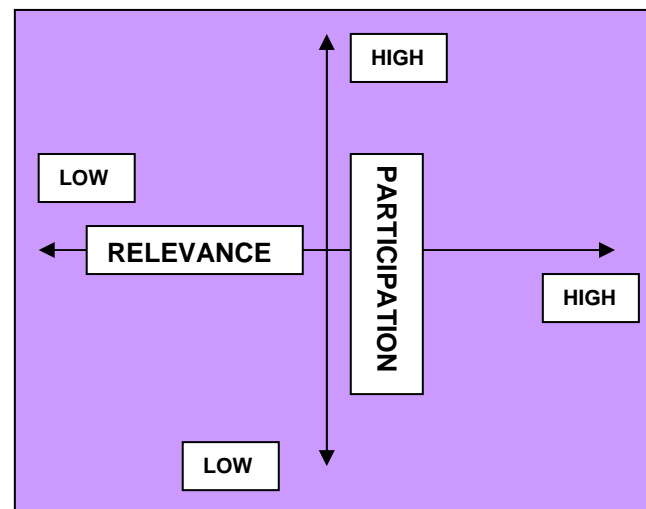
Some of the countries studied, such as Cuba, Canada, The Netherlands, New Zealand have high rates of both participation and relevance. In these countries, the programmes are available to all, have relevance across to the various groups within the country and are of general high quality.

On the other hand, in Belgium and the United Kingdom, programmes are generally accessible to most people through low cost provisions but despite this the forms of arts experienced tend to attract an elite audience and do not always have relevance across different ethnic groups, social classes, economic and educational standards. In these cases, it could be argued that there is a high level of participation but much lower levels of relevance.

Conversely, in Australia and the USA one could argue that where arts education exists it is of high standard and relevant to the needs of the learners, but often the access to these programmes may be limited to people from a certain social

class or those with the talent and resources to gain the right of entry to such programmes.

In a fourth scenario, a situation exists of both low relevance and low participation. In such countries, arts and cultural education is poorly supported and is inaccessible. This inaccessibility may be caused by high cost, lack of cultural content, geographic isolation, exclusion, and/or low quality. This phenomenon could be represented diagrammatically as



follows:

Given sufficient statistical, semi-statistical and qualitative data it might be possible to “plot” all the countries’ arts and cultural education on the two-by-two diagram above. But in order to be able to do this, it would be necessary to think about the factors that effect participation and govern relevance. We can

assume too, that ideal arts and cultural education would encourage high levels of participation and offer a programme that was in itself of high quality with high levels of relevancy.

Increasing participation

There is considerable difference between the arts and cultural education that is mandated in a country and the nature and quality of the arts education programme the children actually receive. There seems to be a gulf between the general view that the arts are 'good' for children and an almost *laissez faire* attitude to ensuring the arts education a child receives is of high quality.

For example, arts education is a compulsory part of school education in 84% of countries (Bamford, 2006). Within these countries, 94% of the respondents stated that arts education was taught as a freestanding subject in its own right (though the nature of what this entails can be quite different). To this extent, one could argue that the global level of participation – as least as it appears in policy – is very high. Yet what does the policy actually mean in terms of participation?

On average children receive 176 hours of arts and cultural education per year in primary schools and 165 hours per year in secondary schools education (Bamford, 2006). Several

countries indicated a high level of variation between the times spent on arts education. For example, within the United States of America (USA) there is a, "wild variation from school to school and community to community, with some schools receiving almost no arts education whatsoever and where it does exist, it is typically for 40-minute periods". The National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education (The National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education, 2000) in the 1999-2000 school year found that arts education received 46 hours per year in public elementary and 44 hours within secondary schools.

Contrary to the belief that the provision of arts education (and hence participation) is a core responsibility of education systems, it appears that in practice a large number of non-education related government and non-government organisations directly contribute to arts education. While central government plays a major role in supporting arts education in 83% of countries, industry (63%), charities and foundations (67%) and individuals (63%) all perform foremost roles in arts education. International organisations (54%), galleries (42%) and broadcasters (46%) are also highly significant contributors to arts education. Trade unions are also involved in 20% of countries.

Given the diversity of organisations involved, what is clear is that, to be able to deliver arts education programmes within schools, the support of a number of institutions is required. It is therefore apparent that while implementation of arts policy begins with central government, it also needs the backing of a number of non-government (NGOs) and cultural bodies. This makes the process of implementation more complex, but may add to the potential richness of the partnerships formed and could enhance the participation in - and relevance of - arts education provisions.

It tends to indicate that high rates of participation may only be achievable either where the government takes a direct role in mandating the arts compulsory part of education and/or where solid partnership agreements exist. In a number of national studies in Europe, it appears that strong support of arts education at the local (city or municipal) level also increases the rate of participation. There are also considerable questions about the importance of 'in school' and out of school' provisions. Once again the more detailed European studies undertaken would suggest that if you are wishing to increase participation rates, in schools arts education may be better to support than out of school activities. Though, as a word of warning, while not always the case, sometimes outside school activities have greater community connection

and are more relevant to the needs and interest of the children.

There is a disjuncture between 'official' statistics and assumptions of participation and the reality in the classroom. Often the 'coalface delivery' cannot match the expectations established by policy as the physical spaces and human resources are not equipped to adequately deliver the programmes. Arts education tends to be poorly resourced both within the arts sector and more broadly in the cultural sector. While highly motivated, creative staff can compensate for under resourced programmes to produce quality outcomes this should not be seen as an excuse for inadequate human and physical resource development. Lack of funds, inadequate resources, insufficient dedicated time and rigid structures are all factors likely to limit the success of an arts-rich programme.

In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948), Article 27 (1), it was emphasized that, "Everyone has the right **freely to participate** in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts". This declaration was prefaced by Article 26 (2) that stipulated that "Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and

to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.”

This declaration established the rights of all children to receive substantial and high quality arts and cultural education as a key part of any general system of education. Despite the high level of international acceptance of the value of the arts - and willingness to pay ‘lip-service’ to its place within core education - the actual provisions received by many children around the world is of very low quality.

Consequently, while an immediate aim might be **participation** in arts and cultural activities of young people, this provides only half the picture. There is very little point forcing children to participate in activities that may be boring, disengaging, uncreative, uninspiring, irrelevant or downright poor quality. To increase participation without also ensuring **relevance** is in fact more likely to do more harm than good.

The following section, therefore, focuses on how the arts and cultural learning can be made relevant to children and young people in terms of methods of instruction, structure and content.

Increasing relevance

Relevance is becoming a more complicated issue. We can distinguish between three levels of relevance:

1. Relevance to the nation;
2. Relevance to the community, and;
3. Relevance to the individual.

To add further to definitions, each of these levels of relevance can also include relevant across columns of purpose. For example, relevance can also apply to educational, social, spiritual, economic or artistic development.

The justification for arts and cultural education developed at a time of cultural homogeneity and has remained broadly the same despite the fact that populations have become more cultural heterogeneous. This might seem bewildering as cultural education is often grounded in a national identity which is increasingly contested.

At a more specific level, teachers are now faced with a broader number of tasks than was the case previously. In many instances, the nature of the teacher’s ‘class’ has also changed considerably. It is now more often than not the case that the children will come from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds; speak a range of languages; include children with special learning needs, and; involve complex learning

and behaviour needs. Within this climate, defining relevance is extremely challenging.

Despite this, the overall rationale for arts education around the world seems to have changed little over the years. Cultural, social and aesthetic goals continue to be the main reason given for arts education. Since the mid 1950s the literature around arts education has promoted messages of child art and creativity. While these factors continue to be important, more importance within education is given to the value of the arts in building the individual and cultural identity of the child. It could be argued that this aim is as relevant today as it was when it emerged in the 1950s.

There appears to be a strong and persistent growth of notions of global values of building identity and increasing the relevance to the individual child of all learning experiences – particularly those in the arts. While young people increasingly inhabit the shared globalised world of *Face Book*, *Simpsons* and *Nintendo*, there is cultural counter-trend which seemingly stresses the values of localism. Ironically, the two do not appear to contradict one another, but rather coexist seamlessly in the minds of the child. Yet this raises fundamental dilemmas for those charged with developing **relevant** curriculum content in arts and cultural education.

In particular, this has given rise to a number of discussions about the place of cultural education within arts education. In northern Europe, the notion of cultural ‘canons’ has had a direct influence on definitions of arts education. The arts are seen as an explicit way to influence the child’s cultural development. There is considerable debate world wide as to the extent with which this cultural component - often delivered through arts education – is about cultural **diversity** and the extent to which it may be about **preservation** of cultural heritage. Do these cultural canons support inclusive views of cultural diversity and promote greater relevance?

Cultural heritage study is a core part of the arts curriculum in many countries. It is less clear in a global picture the extent to which arts education builds culture, is proactive in cultural development or merely retells culture from a dominant cultural history. As an aside to the cultural debate, the close link between cultural heritage and the arts may indirectly lead to the broadening of the definitions and content of arts education. This in turn could encourage greater relevance, but in the opposite pattern, the trend is also observed where the arts programmes revert to more nationalistic models of ‘culture’ often favouring more elitist, dominant cultural models.

While there is distinct value for both education and cultural agencies to build closer links, there may be a problematic split between arts/cultural funding and education funding. There is criticism of approaches to current cultural policy that see the education of children and young people as being about 'audience building for the future'.

Such approaches place relevance for young people in a sort of time capsule, suggesting that by 'loading' the child early in their life with sufficient arts and culture, it can be assumed that in later life this latent dose of art can be exploited in terms of customers and audiences for the arts. This is insulting to the child. It fails to recognise that children already are articulate and enthusiastic consumers of the arts and culture now – not only into the future.

Furthermore, we know that children's decisions in relation to arts and culture have profound effect on them as individuals and on the decisions of their parents, and society more generally. To assume that relevance only commences once an individual is 18 years of age is to deny the social reality of young people.

Conversely, 'arts education' should not be viewed too narrowly as being only the preserve of children (surely adults

need education in the broad spectrum of the arts) nor that cultural policy is only about adult engagement with arts and culture. Similarly, arts and cultural understanding could be equated to other lifestyle issues such as justice, health, fitness and so on in terms of their lifelong applicability. Just as it is not possible to 'front load' anyone with enough ethics, health or physical fitness and so on to last them their life, nor is it possible to do the same with arts education. Concurrently, to neglect regular arts and cultural 'exercise' in later life is likely to result in a community that is culturally and artistically 'unfit'. In this way, we need to consider if relevance is an issue only for children or something that should be considered more broadly by culture and education.

In 1999 UNESCO launched the *International Appeal for the Promotion of Arts Education and Creativity within Schools*, as part of the construction of a culture of peace¹. The appeal, among other things, stated that: "we are today clearly and strongly aware of the important influence of the creative spirit in shaping the human personality, bringing out the full potential of children and adolescents and maintaining their emotional balance." The Appeal also emphasized the need to move to more balanced kinds of education to meet the needs

¹ Text available at <http://www.unesco.org/culture/lea>

of the 21st century. An interesting dimension of the technology revolution is the way it relies upon and manifests visual communication. For example, the number of service contracts for mobile phones with built-in cameras is 48 million, or about 60% of all mobile phones. The latest 3G mobile phones support not just photos, but digital camera quality video and real-time videoconferencing between several people.

Similarly, economic forecasts (World Economic Forum, Davos 2006) suggest that the arts will be a major force in economic development. The so-called creative industries are emerging as the largest single sector of economic activity in many countries and as the driving force of the 'tiger' economies of India, China and Korea.

Yet despite a future likely to be highly dependent on an 'arts-inclined' population, the research (Bamford, 2006) paints a somewhat depressing picture of the general standard of classroom provisions in arts education. In around 25% of cases, poor quality arts programmes may in fact negatively impact children's participation in the arts, their creativity and their imagination. The arts in practice are largely taught by people with less than 3 months of arts education training. Ways of measuring children's learning in the arts are poorly

developed and funding for arts within education tends to be short-term and insufficient.

Children require relevant, high quality arts education at all levels of education and within both formal and informal education. Yet with the exception of a few countries, the overall standard of arts education received by children is very low. In most countries of the world teachers are not prepared to teach the arts or to make relevant use some of artistic techniques in the learning process. Poor teaching in turn has a negative impact on the child's creativity and it creates a misleading perception of the results of arts education amongst school officials, families and children.

On the other hand, there are examples of good practices around the world. High quality arts education promotes cultural identity and has a positive impact on the academic performance of children, especially in areas of literacy and the learning of second languages. Concurrently, arts-rich education which has a high level of relevancy leads to an improvement in students' attitude towards school, parental and community perception of schools, as well as on student interest for culture and the arts. It is of significance that high quality education where there is the greatest impact at all levels – child, learning environment and community- is

achieved where excellent programmes exist both in the arts and through artistic approaches, such as in case study examples from Canada, Australia, United Kingdom, Finland, Slovakia and others.

'Quality' is defined as being those arts education provisions that are of recognized high value and worth in terms of the skills, attitudes and performativity engendered. In other words, a form of arts education that is **relevant and meaningful to the learner**.

According to Pearsall (1998) quality implies something that has been achieved successfully. In the case of arts education, quality is considered to exist as something that may include achievements (i.e. quality outputs), but goes beyond this to consider relevant learning journeys, pathways, partnerships and recognition.

Dewey (1934: 19) writes of quality as being characterized by a "heightened vitality." He further comments that quality signifies, "active and alert commerce with the world: at its height, it implies complete interpretation of self and the world of objects and events." Under this notion, quality is not a fixed disposition but rather as Kissick (1993: 27) notes, "quality is first and foremost an idea, its criteria are susceptible to

influences from within a given society." In this definition, Kissick is pointing to the important link between quality and relevance – to both the individual and in terms of a changing society.

Active partnership can increase relevance through the direct inclusion of a range of cultural and artistic organizations in all aspects of the planning and delivery of arts education programmes. The most effective programmes have managed to build sustainable, long-term and reciprocal associations with cultural agencies and industries. These associations are authentic partnerships, with all players within the partnership acknowledging the contributions made by the others.

Relevant arts programmes are built around the notion of inclusivity and worthy arts-rich education for all. This means that **all children**, regardless of artistic skills and abilities, initial motivation, behaviour, economic status or other entering attribute, should be entitled to receive high standard arts provisions, both within the various art forms and using creative and artistic approaches to teach other areas of the curriculum. This is a particularly important in relation to initiatives to provide education for all and to look at greater inclusion of a variety of marginalized groups within general education.

To meet a baseline in terms of quality arts education, education providers need to ensure that there are arts programmes for **ALL** children. Providing classes for talented or interested students **only** cannot be considered as providing a comprehensive education for all. At a practical level, having a school band, choir, dance group, once-a-year play or art club would not within itself constitute adequate or relevant arts education. Children with special needs should be given equal access to high quality arts education and an opportunity to engage in meaningful arts learning in all spheres of creative endeavour. It is important to appreciate that the artistic potential of children with special needs is as full as that of other children. Consequently arts education needs to be treated with equal rigour and ambition for **all** children.

Relevant arts-rich programmes tend to flourish in situations where there is scope for organizational flexibility. Within the education sectors, rigid timetables, compartmentalization of learning and restrictive assessment structures tend to limit the extent and quality of arts and cultural education. Similarly, within cultural organizations, high costs, containment within the physical boundaries of a gallery or facility and lack of administrative flexibility limit the likely success of engaging fully with the education sector.

It is crucial therefore, that quality provisions in arts-rich education involve democratic approaches to planning, policy, implementation and evaluation. Both schools and arts and cultural organizations need to be prepared to open their boundaries - actual and metaphoric - to the influences of the community within which they exist.

This is particularly the case within marginalized communities where the perceptions of both schools and cultural organizations tend to be quite negative and often based on misconceptions, generalizations and senses of alienation. The histories of both schools and cultural organizations have not been conducive to open and democratic participation of minority groups within communities.

To redress this, action needs to be undertaken to reach out to these groups through **relevant** art curriculum. Exhibition and performance afford wonderful opportunities to more fully engage the community in education and cultural provisions and can act as a catalyst enabling greater community participation.

Active art making and performances increase the likelihood of a programme being relevant to young people. It could be

argued that almost all of the quality programmes placed major value on arts making and performance and exhibition. It was asserted that engagement in active arts creation engendered particular learning and achievement, only possible when embedded within active practice.

Certainly, the energy and enthusiasm of young people is increased in an atmosphere of active engagement in the arts. In particular, quality programmes place importance on children's feelings and the expression of individuality. High quality programmes provide a range of enticing and varied learning experiences aimed at encouraging the child to unfold their ideas. All children are perceived to possess the potential for artistic expression and so the emphasis is on studio production and performance.

Quality programmes make artistic connections with the local environment. Such connection increases the relevance of a programme to the children's needs. Through the use of local artists and artworks, the teachers hope that the children will make personal connections with art. Connected programmes such as these have strong powers of social change and can be used to build the children's self esteem and address social justice and equity issues within the community.

Conclusion

Arts education programmes have impact on the child; the teaching and learning environment, and; on the community, but these benefits were only observed where quality programmes were in place. Poor quality and inadequate programs do little to enhance the educational potential of the child or build first-rate schools.

It is the argument of this paper, that high quality arts and cultural education has high levels of both participation and high levels of relevance. These programmes are no more expensive to implement than poor quality programmes and afford the opportunity to initiate sustained educational reform and greatly enhance the overall excellence of education. The focus should be less about 'Education for All' and more about participation in quality learning provisions for all. In this regard, the arts have an enormous amount to offer education.

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